

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Mr Yang Razali Kassim, Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

*Global Health Security:
COVID-19 & Its Impacts*

Disinformation: The Spreading of Islamophobia

By Remy Mahzam

SYNOPSIS

COVID-19-related disinformation campaigns designed to stoke Islamophobic sentiment are fuelling an uptick in hate attacks targeting Muslims in some countries. The unprecedented conditions created by the ongoing pandemic offer fresh opportunities for extremists to exploit, and require timely interventions.

COMMENTARY

HARD-LINE right-wing groups in parts of Asia and the West are preying on people's fears and vulnerabilities amidst the ongoing global pandemic to push a slew of conspiracy theories and disinformation aimed at vilifying Muslims.

In countries such as India, the United Kingdom and the United States, various far-right movements, are turning to a familiar playbook – by peddling Islamophobic hate speech through unsubstantiated conspiracy theories, memes and fake videos online. For example, perpetrators of anti-Muslim propaganda (some of whom enjoy state patronage), have made up statistics about virus infections and falsely accuse some Muslims of deliberately spreading the virus as well as flouting lockdown rules.

Islamophobia: Not a New Issue

While not a new issue, studies show that levels of Islamophobia increase around certain events. Researchers in the UK, for example, have observed that the ongoing

Ramadan month seems to have instigated a fresh wave of conspiracy theories online around Muslims, with false claims that the virus is likely to spread around this time.

Several experts have also recently cautioned that given many people are currently cooped up at home with social distancing rules, some could be vulnerable to the influx of fake news and conspiracy theories online, which mostly go unchallenged. The problem with such disinformation is it can lead to wider retribution against Muslims and, possibly by extension, other minority communities, when lockdowns are eventually lifted.

Around the world, aggressive efforts have gone into curtailing the proliferation of 'infodemics', a term coined by the World Health Organisation (WHO) to reference the proliferation of false information on COVID-19, both online and offline. Similar initiatives are needed to inoculate against the spread of hateful speech directed at racial and religious minorities.

Otherwise, festering grievances may again be exploited by radical groups, including Islamist terrorist networks, who traditionally ramp up their propaganda and recruitment efforts during Ramadan, to sow discord.

'Corona Jihad' and the Exploitation of Fissures

In recent months, hard-right extremists in India have scapegoated the country's Muslim population by claiming they are deliberately spreading the coronavirus through "corona-jihad". On various online channels, such as Islamophobic hashtags and memes began popping up soon after the outbreak.

A study by Equality Labs, a South Asian digital human rights group, revealed the "corona-jihad" hashtag was used around 300,000 times between 29 March and 3 April 2020, and viewed by as many as 165 million people. Other prominent hashtags such as #BioJihad, #Coronaterrorism, #MuslimsSpreadingCorona, which were translated into local languages, also gained online traction.

Analysis by Voyager Infosec further revealed more than 30,000 videos were circulated on social media platform TikTok, as part of a targeted disinformation campaign aimed at misleading Muslims in India into flouting safe distancing conditions and avoid mask wearing.

Content portraying Muslims as the allegedly key purveyors of the COVID-19 virus, was also prevalent on other social media platforms such as Facebook, Telegram and WhatsApp.

With coronavirus infections surging across the country in recent weeks, the rising hostility toward India's 200 million Muslims threatens to inflame longstanding religious tensions in the Hindu-majority nation. Earlier this year, divisions had already begun to harden when the government passed a citizenship bill that discriminated against Muslims, sparking nationwide protests that have left scores dead.

The spread of COVID-19-related hate speech has further exacerbated these divisions, and also contributed to an upsurge in anti-Muslim hate crimes in recent weeks. Attacks

on Muslims, including farmers driven out of villagers and others beaten by angry mobs, have been reported across the country. Analysts say such attacks could spike both during Ramadan and after the lockdowns are lifted.

Islamophobia in the West

In the UK, law enforcement agencies have warned that dozens of far-right groups are attempting to weaponise COVID-19 to instigate anti-Muslim attacks. For example, far-right activists have taken to circulating old videos and images of British Muslims praying in mosques in an attempt to portray them as violating social distancing rules during the ongoing nationwide lockdown. Muslim advocacy groups and the police have since come out to debunk these claims.

Similarly, far-right hate groups in the US have taken to spreading false conspiracy theories, including a claim that churches in the country were forced to close during the pandemic while mosques remained open for worship.

US President Donald Trump was recently also accused of stoking Islamophobia, after claiming the authorities may enforce social distancing rules in mosques during Ramadan differently, compared to how churchgoers were treated during the recent Easter celebrations.

Media reporting has also contributed, in part, to the spread of hate sentiments. In India, the mainstream media outlet *India Today*, for example, released a news report titled “Madrasas Hotspots”, which inaccurately accused some madrasas (Islamic schools) of violating the country’s lockdown rules.

The *Österreich OE24*, an Austrian daily, also drew ire recently for using the image of a hijab-wearing woman in an online news report of a suspected coronavirus case involving a Chinese stewardess.

Fighting the Virus and Disinformation Together

COVID-19 has featured prominently in both far-right and Islamist militant groups’ propaganda messaging since the outbreak started. For IS, the month of Ramadan has become a strategic time in which to launch attacks. IS will look to exploit the COVID-19-related grievances of vulnerable Muslims to sow discord, recruit into its ranks and call for fresh attacks.

To counter the harmful spread of COVID-19-related hate sentiments, social media companies will have to work closely with health authorities to establish security firewalls against disinformation campaigns both during and after the current pandemic. This includes removing false claims and Islamophobic conspiracy theories that have been flagged by global health agencies as hate propaganda.

Religious actors also have significant roles to play, particularly in providing guidance and promoting solidarity, interfaith tolerance and resilience for vulnerable communities.

They have an important role in guiding their congregations to discern rumours, distortions and myths about other religious groups. In times of crisis, faith institutions are also uniquely positioned to identify vulnerable individuals in their communities, and quickly mobilise the necessary support.

Remy Mahzam is an Associate Research Fellow at the International Centre for Political Violence & Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (RSIS), Singapore. This is part of an RSIS Series.

Nanyang Technological University
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg